

Most sportsmen spend August entering and exiting artificially cooled environments. But for the hard core deer hunting enthusiasts, weekends are spent on their favorite piece of hunting real estate, preparing camp and more important, locating potential sites to establish cool season food plots.

A food plot can be defined as a parcel of land mechanically manipulated in order to provide forage for a particular specie of wildlife. The unique thing about wildlife plantings is that they benefit virtually every bird and animal that inhabits the area. For example, elbon rye is relished by deer during its early stage of development, but when mature and lignified in the spring, deer cease using it. Birds, particularly turkey and quail, on the other hand, utilize the seed head plus the grasshoppers and other insects attracted to the mature plants.

The fact that numerous animals and birds benefit from a food plot is only one of its multiple advantages. Unlike a galvanized automatic feeder, a food plot is aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Plus, once established and planted, a food plot requires no attention. It affords sportsmen a method to nutritionally assist their deer herd in a very natural way without disturbance. For example, if a sanctuary is established in the middle of a 500-acre parcel, the ideal setup would be to create a food plot within the sanctuary boundary. By doing so, deer are afforded protection around a highly desirable food source, making the sanctuary that much more effective in not only attracting deer, but keeping them there.

Cool season food plots also increase deer observation time; that is, deer generally remain feeding on the succulent grain for a considerable length of time, permitting hunters ample time to critique a particular buck's rack. This additional time is

particularly important when shooting does, and you want to make sure it is a doe you are looking at and not a big buck fawn.

Plot size can vary from one-tenth acre to huge 50-plus-acre plots. Generally, the size of a food plot depends on the size of place one hunts. If you hunt on a 500-acre lease, you may have five to seven plots one-half acre in size, whereas on 5,000 acres, you may have five plots seven to 10 acres in size.

The shape of a food plot is as important as its size. If domestic stock is present and the area must be fenced, square plots are recommended to facilitate fencing. However, if this is not a concern, food plots can be long and narrow which actually benefits wildlife more because of the edge established.

Edge is the interface between two cover types or more directly, a finite location where two habitat types meet. Good examples of edge would be where the forest meets a meadow or a point at which soil types change, represented in a change of plant life. The unique thing about edge is that it can be established, manipulated, and sustained.

I successfully enhanced the nutritional status of deer on one particular ranch I managed in East Texas by planting yucchi clover along the roadsides. Not only were deer afforded a high protein yielding legume in the late winter through spring, but the substantial increase in edge augmented the production of high quality native plants and weeds highly desirable by deer.

A very obvious image of edge is that created by roller chopping, particularly in South Texas. This technique is one in which several heavy rollers with blades are pulled by a dozer, chopping up vegetation, even trees existing in its path. The result is a strip of vegetation reduced to an early successional stage of development. Regrowth is almost

immediate following rainfall. With sunlight, forbs, otherwise absent before the overstory was reduced, begin to germinate. The vegetation on the disturbed site is temporarily altered to yield a plethora of highly nutritional and palatable forbs and weeds extremely attractive to whitetail deer. By roller chopping or disking narrow strips along roadways, two things are accomplished. First, plant growth returns to an earlier successional stage of development, creating a micro-habitat rich in high quality nutritious forbs, weeds, and low-growing brush. Secondly, the removal of mature vegetation enhances deer observations because more deer are attracted to the freshly cleared sites. These two results of mechanically manipulating habitat improve both quality of deer and the experience pursuing them. But Nature is not static, that is, it is dynamic, always in a state of flux. Within three years of chopping, aerating, or disking, the procedure must be repeated or the benefits yield to rapidly maturing brush. The vegetation not only attains excessive, undesirable heights, but mesquite trees return in a multi-stemmed coppice configuration, reducing visibility plus inhibiting critical sunlight from penetrating the sun-starved plants at the ground layer.

Another food plot design I implemented is what I refer to as the “wagon wheel”. For example, in the Post Oak hickory region of Texas, I would cut out three to five swaths 20 feet wide and approximately 75 yards long, originating from the shooting house or deer blind, extending outward like the spokes on a bicycle wheel. A chain saw was used to thin regrowth timber. When possible, I shredded the strips on an annual basis. To augment their attractability to deer, I fertilized the strips. These wagon wheels were ideal in locations difficult to get a tractor and disk into. The point is, a tractor is not

required to establish a food plot. I employed the wagon wheel on several ranches in South Texas, but I would disk the strips and plant them to cool season grains.

Obviously, what you can plant varies from the Piney Woods to the golden triangle. The limiting factor is precipitation. Without irrigation, west of Interstate 35 in South Texas, summer or warm season food plots are ephemeral, seldom lasting long enough to benefit deer. In East Texas, however, warm season food plots produce tons of highly nutritious forage for deer.

Can food plots produce trophy-antlered bucks? Certainly!! Any time an abundance of highly nutritious and palatable forage is made available to deer on a consistent basis, good things will happen. The major factor here is consistency. If annual food plots are properly planted, there is no question that you will come closer to realizing the trophy potential of the bucks in your herd.

It is important to remember that nutrition is only one of the three prerequisites of producing quality-racked bucks. Age is another one. It is irrelevant how many food plots are established if an excessive buck harvest is conducted; few bucks will make it to maturity when they develop their best antlers. Thus in order to realize the nutritional benefit from food plots, a conservative buck harvest must be maintained.

It is also critical to understand that cool season food plots and warm season food plots benefit deer in different ways. For example, warm season food plots, those growing throughout spring and summer, have a greater impact on antler development and the nutritional status of lactating dams than does the cool season plantings. Winter cereal grains assist post rutting bucks by providing a concentrated source of high quality forage

at a time when bucks are physically drawn. In other words, oats planted in winter represent a special source of food for a current physiological process.

Both cool and warm season plantings are beneficial but require rainfall. The ideal time to plant is right before the rainy season. In South Texas, there will generally be rainfall in late September through October, thus the optimum time to prepare the seed bed is in early September, completing planting by early October. Based on my experience in South Texas, one can expect to get a good crop of oats five or six times out of ten planting seasons. That is about a 50% chance of realizing a crop. Not good odds for most of us, especially when you consider the energy, time, and money invested in establishing and planting a food plot. But plant it anyway. Why? Because a lost crop in the fall represents a prepared seed bed for a natural spring food plot which will provide deer with an abundance of native plants and weeds.

In East Texas where rain is more dependable, add some clover seed to your winter grain mix. Thus when the cereal grain matures and becomes less attractive to deer in the late winter, the clover initiates growth, providing deer with an excellent source of food through summer.

Farming practices for deer are highly variable. It is more like an art than a science, but by analyzing your soil, fertilizing if needed, and planting at the right time, you can create a dependable source of food for deer when they need it most.

No matter where you hunt, food plots have a niche in deer management. How and when you establish this management strategy is climatically controlled, but with a little creativity, you can establish your own food plot and enjoy it as much as the deer that use it.

Captions for slides. All photos by Bob Zaiglin.

1. The edge created by disking along roadsides is extremely attractive to all wildlife, particularly deer.
2. Cool season food plots afford recuperating bucks a concentrated source of nourishment when energy conservation is critical to survival.
3. A lost crop in the fall represents a prepared seed bed for native plants during the spring.
4. Any soil disturbance is attractive to deer, affording sportsmen a greater chance of seeing that buck of a lifetime.